

Thompson, Russell

# VOTING BY MAIL

Is It The Coming Great  
Electoral Reform?

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"It cannot be a matter for surprise that the methods of election adopted in the early stages of representative institutions fail to respond to the needs of the more complex political conditions of highly civilized communities. The movement in favor of improved electoral methods is in keeping with the advances made in all other human institutions. We no longer travel by stage coach, nor read by rushlight. We cross the Atlantic with a certainty and an ease unknown and undreamed of a little while ago. Means of communication, the press, the mail, the telegraph, the telephone have developed marvelously in response to modern requirements. This continuous adaptation is the law of existence and, in view of modern political conditions, we cannot permanently refuse to adapt our electoral methods to the more perfect organization of a progressive democracy."—PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION, by John H. Humphreys.

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By Russell Thompson.

# ELECTIONS BY MAIL

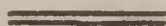
AND

## THE PLAN *of* EFFECTUAL GOVERNMENT

A DIGEST, FOR THE BUSY ELECTOR, OF

"AN INQUIRY INTO THE FEASIBILITY OF HOLDING ENTIRE POLITICAL ELECTIONS BY WAY OF THE UNITED STATES MAIL, THUS ELIMINATING THE POLLING PLACE AND ITS PARAPHERNALIA."—By Russell Thompson.

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It takes a volume to tell in detail the ambitious plan of "elections by mail." In these few pages it can be sketched only lightly.

It would be possible to hold entire political elections through the medium of the United States mail, and to hold them more effectively and economically than through the unwieldly and unlovely polling place. In doing away with the polling place and its cumbersome paraphernalia the registration place would also be superseded by a less embarrassing method of listing eligible voters.

**The modus operandi:** Beginning with the technical end, a little group of "by mail" enthusiasts who are also mailing experts of long experience, have devised a plan of holding entire elections by mail in lieu of the polling place—which latter is keeping so many busy men and timid women from exercising the franchise. It promises to be a "fraud-proof and fool-proof" system, ultra modern and mechanical, by which a special form

of folded, one piece<sup>1</sup> ballot would be prepared for mailing to elector (voter) in a single operation of machinery—from the roll of special paper direct to tied bundles marked for each local post-office division. To be explicit, this machine, or rather combination of machines, would print, perforate, crimp, cut out, gum, number,<sup>2</sup> address, fold, seal and tie into bundles the ballots for each division. The local postoffice would untie and deliver the ballots, along with the regular mail deliveries, to the electors, who would mark them by a pencil **puncture** instead of an X, then seal and remail them (postage franked) on the same day in a near mail box.<sup>3</sup> The postal service would deliver these marked ballots at headquarters in the same bundles. These bundles would be placed into another machine which would untie them, then unseal and unfold the ballots and feed them individually into a delicate mechanism which would automatically count the returns rapidly and correctly, somewhat as a player-piano is made to play notes by the record,

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<sup>1</sup> Simplicity is the biggest factor in any effective balloting system. The obstacle that more than anything else has held up postal voting so long has been the matter of the ballot format. The three-piece ballot system now used in "Absentee Voting" (two envelopes and ballot sheet, not to mention application and affidavits—courageous is the patriot who votes by the absentee system!) is out of the question for entire elections. It is possible even that the simplest enclosure form would be obstructive and unfeasible.

<sup>2</sup> With government control of elections (see page 3) it might be advisable that every registrant in the country have a number on the lists. While this might appear to be an infringement of the secret ballot system, it is but necessary to remember that an elector's number is only one in forty or fifty millions, among which, and with the mechanical handling, his identity would be wholly lost, except: That in case of fraud or defection the ballot could be the more easily traced by the government. The good elector would find no fault with this, even if the bad would object. It is possible the secret ballot is nowadays more a habit than a real necessity. No one has ever been able to explain what the secret ballot has to offer an independent and candid elector! There are even moral arguments against it. For the evil voter and "repeater" it offers a footprintless escape, and is in other ways an aid to fraud. In the weak-willed it encourages double-dealing. It is possibly a case where the word "secret" has not wholly thrown off the sense of sinister.

<sup>3</sup> The regulations would require that every ballot be remailed whether elector voted or not. An elector would be free to vote any way he wished, or not vote at all; but he would be under penalty to remail his ballot. An unmarked, wrongly marked or tampered with ballot would be automatically thrown out by the counting machine.



the punctured ballot in this case becoming the record. So you see no hands but those of the elector and the mail men would be intended to touch the ballot from beginning to end. There are other special safeguards, too complex to explain here, besides drastic postal laws and government inspection and supervision.

The mailists propose to supersede the registration place by a form of "registration by canvass," like the census is canvassed, an old but highly commended plan. In addition to its attractiveness to the elector it is really a form of going after him and her, a "go-get-'em" plan of increasing the registration. There are special arrangements for keeping the registration lists pure.

Right here it would be natural to inquire: "How would the mail system supersede the work of the tally books, clerks, judges, challengers, etc., that protect the polling place?" It wouldn't supersede them; it would dispense with them; they are unnecessary in receiving even an intrinsically valuable letter by mail; then why a ballot? There is small question of a mail ballot getting into the wrong hands; but if it should it could be easily traced. The postoffice address of an elector is really a safer delivery than the polling place identification.

Along with the move to postalize elections,<sup>4</sup> it is proposed to have the federal government, in the

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<sup>4</sup> The aims of the mailists are wholly idealistic and patriotic; no profit is possible to the planners, while cost of publicity is borne by them without thought of returns. Though plans are worked out on paper no machinery has been completed by them and no attempt made to obtain patents. In fact most of the units of the composite machines are already in operation in one place and another and in a few cases have been patented for years. The task of collating and obtaining the use of these units, of making the liaisons and constructing the complete machines, of obtaining and protecting rights, etc., is too big a job for any unofficial group, as well as too uncertain. Only the government with its facilities could feasibly construct them, and after the mail system was adopted. A tentative mail system could be installed without the machines, by letting out the contracts for ballots and counting returns by hand. But such a condition would not be fraud-proof, and of course not nearly so economical.

interests of the best government, take over the entire business of elections everywhere—all the country's elections, national, state and local—and place their operation on a safe, sound, scientific and uniform basis—but, of course, to have nothing to do with **what goes on the ballot.** The compilation of the latter would still remain in the hands of the local election commissioners or authorized bodies. The government's part would be purely functional, more so than its handling of the mails and interstate commerce.<sup>5</sup> A newly created department of elections would be necessary in Washington, with a branch in each state. The mail elections system would apply only to continental America, according to present plans.

With this government control universal registration would be advisable and, so far as the states could be induced to permit, universal qualification.

**Now for the rationale:** What is the big idea of voting by mail? Why is it advisable?

The spirit of the first is, in a line: "All government by vote with everybody voting." Amplified a little it would be: "To find the easiest medium for the freest expression by every citizen on every question of government for every occasion."

While postal voting is intended primarily for city elections and mass voting, it applies with equal if not greater value to remote districts and scattered electors. The farmer and his wife are often too busy to lay aside work and travel to a polling place; for which reason the so-called "agricultural vote" has always suffered in volume and power.

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<sup>5</sup> The business of elections, as the fountain of all government, is surely a government function and not the business, as it appears to be now, of every local handyman and handywoman. At the same time, it must be understood that mail elections are not dependent upon government control of elections; the latter is only a suggested reform related to the former. The government while constructing the machines for its own elections could construct them also for the states.

It is true that the polling place is a well-grounded habit with us, and it requires an effort to conceive voting apart from it. Yet it is essentially a small borough device, where the few eligibles gathered to poll their preferences. It did not have even the advantage of a printed ballot until the last generation. As an instrument for the great mass expression of modern communities it is both unscientific and inadequate.

The editor of a leading eastern journal works himself into a sorry passion over the suggestion of elections by mail, seeing in it only a "loophole for every species of political fraud" and the "complete breakdown of popular government."

It is surprising how much shallow thinking in general is applied to the factors of electoral science, if thinking is applied at all, and how perverted are its images, the big becoming the small and the small becoming the big. Even gifted economists everywhere discuss at length and in minute detail the various phases of political existence and at the same time either ignore or largely miss the psychology of voting; at least its two chief factors: The motive of the voter, and, The depth of the motive.

Is it possible to defeat the intent of an evil voter and force him to vote for good? Does the voter who accepts a bribe ever repent in the polling place and vote for good? Would a voter who was prevented from accepting a bribe be likely to repent and vote for good? Does the voter who promises to vote for evil intend to vote for good and hide his deception and mendacity behind the secret ballot? Are there neglected corners of the Republic where bodies of citizens are: (a) forced to be voters, (b) forced to vote contrary to their best interests? Let the reader supply his own answers. Ours might not agree with his.



What is the depth of the elector's motive?

Sincere thinkers have objected: "If a citizen is not interested enough in his government to go willingly to the polls, of what value would his choice be if the ballot were carried to him?" A complete answer to this question, setting forth the many, many reasons why citizens shun the polling place, would fill pages, but would probably reveal everything else than pure lack of interest. Interest is relative, bound to be so in the intensive living of today, and the recurrent question is: "Is it worth my while?" It has been roughly estimated that the cost, in inconvenience, loss of time, etc., of voting at the polling place averages one dollar to each voter, divided between himself/herself and others to whom he/she is responsible at the time. Generally, a citizen likes to vote—is proud to have voted. Give him or her a ballot simple enough for a satisfactory scrutiny, and uncostly access to it, and he or she can be depended upon to vote each time. Even to those willing to pay the cost, the **sense** of the futility of voting under present obstructive conditions, complex ballot, etc., has ten times more than lack of interest kept them away from the polls. The esprit of voting is accumulative, and vice versa. Numbers encourage ~~men~~ members, while abstention encourages abstention.

So far as the mechanics of voting are concerned the intrusion of fraud is dispensable in whatever system.

What a bugaboo, then, is this "balloting frauds"—at its worst but a centesimal of the total of political corruption? As a matter of fact, all the really harmful corrupt practices, the "deals," bribery, graft, log-rolling, etc., are perpetrated far from the polling place. A Tammany may thrive under the most fraud-proof balloting system.



A few hundred votes are malcounted at an election and there is an outcry. Seven hundred thousand electors ignore a vital election and there is scarcely a groan. Which delinquency defeats more the ends of good government? True, one does not condone the other, but the proportion is noteworthy nevertheless. It is doubtful if the total ballot frauds in the country, leaving out New York City, in a generation, would equal the total of abstentions at one Chicago election. The policy of huge, panic-built safeguards erected against a few leaks and frauds, when it results in obstructions or demands that discourage millions of the precious disinterested, is a penny-wise-pound-foolish one. It is the same unwisdom of the above school of economists who would make voting a steeplechase for the moral good of the voter. Aimed against the corruptionists it in reality works beautifully into their hands, and they probably know it. Until we can get this polls fraud bogey in its true aspect it will be difficult to experiment with a more facile medium of expression than now exists.

What is the function of elections? Merely to receive from the electorate a gesture indicating its preferences in majority form. In some of the Swiss communes—"the cradle of democracy"—this is effected by the holding up of hands on the part of a crowd of citizens. If we could obtain this gesture by wireless, or by some other simple and ~~inconvenient~~ means, so much the better. Even exact figures are of little importance where the gesture indicates a sound majority. The great desideratum is: "A sound majority out of the biggest and freest expression"; and out of such, it may be added, the majority, or plurality, is almost without exception unmistakable. If an absolute majority gesture can be obtained more emphatically by mail than otherwise then the mail is the medium for it.

When looked at unbiasedly, the policy of bestowing office and building up laws through the consent of a small percentage of electors, many of whom are "interested" in the practical sense, appears to be a weak and slovenly method of conducting government. Why all the bother over elections under such conditions?

The recent spurt of interest in "entire elections by mail"<sup>6</sup> may have been inspired by the success in most states of "Absentee Voting" by mail, in spite of its obstructive formula and its being only a postal tail to the polling place. The real impetus may be found in more powerful sources: (a) The admirable advance in scientific service of the U. S. mails; (b) The desire of enfranchised women for a plan to replace the uninviting polling place—which is keeping two-thirds of the women at home; (c) Dissatisfaction with recent legislation and the casting about for a practical medium of a popular referendum, with desire for direct legislation; (d) The success of mail voting in social and commercial elections, also in the so-called "straw" vote; (e) The waning interest in voting caused by loss of time and work in going to the polling place and, by the same effect, the futility of voting. This apathy, of course, works into the hands of the "machine," which is perhaps the best explanation of why it exists. Except in executive elections—those for

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<sup>6</sup> The mail election idea is by no means new, but its bibliography is obviously limited. Postal voting was advocated nearly forty years ago in England by John Leighton (who twice ran for Parliament) and a complete mail voting system, with a clever form of ballot, was devised. Conservatism and the crude mail facilities of the day, however, did not encourage its adoption. (Society of Arts Journal, London, 1888, v. 36, pp. 206-209.) Among American advocates Herbert Constable of Massachusetts in 1908 outlined in prominent magazines a complete mail election system. (Arena, Sept. 1908, v. 40, pp. 216-218.) In 1909 the legislature of California considered a bill for primaries by mail. (California Senate Bill No. 24; intro. by L. B. Roseberry, Jan. 8, 1909.) The Socialist party nominated its presidential and vice-presidential candidates by mail in 1916 (Socialist Party National Office, 220 S. Ashland Ave., Chicago, Ill.) Traveling men's associations, with members in a few states in the hundreds of thousands (more than vote in some large cities) elect their officers by direct mail ballot (not proxies) every year. Others have written offering meritorious plans and suggestions. W. J. Carr, of Buffalo, N. Y., has devised an excellent enclosure system for mail voting.

President, Governor and Mayor—the activity in voting is growing less almost with each election, so that government now more than ever is being ordered by the interested few. In the elections most vital to us, viz: the primaries and the pro-saic judicial, municipal and other multiple office contests, the presence of electors at the polls has often dwindled to the dangerous point. It is possible that most of our social, industrial and political ills may be traced indirectly to this delinquency.

The mailists propose a **renaissance of the Electorate.**<sup>7</sup> Their program is: "Make every decent man and woman adult into an intelligent citizen; make every citizen a qualified elector; make every elector vote at every election."<sup>8</sup> The 1920 census shows over sixty million inhabitants of voting age in the country, while less than twenty-seven millions (women included) voted at the last presidential election. So you can see there is a job ahead.

"Voting should be a pleasure, not a task." The mail method of elections would make voting so easy and attractive there would no longer be excuse for abstention. By it voting would be, as it ought to be, a pleasant, home affair, a family luncheon or dinner table affair if you will, where the ballot could be discussed and marked with ease and correctness and all in one household

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<sup>7</sup> The mailists never use the misleading word "people," as in "government by the people"; their big word is ELECTORATE in describing the governing source. Their second big word is possibly "precision"; they preach the doctrine of precise definitions and precise methods in government, the abolishment of vague and halting procedure and indefinite statutes. "A sound and effectual government should know what to do under all conditions and be prepared to do it unflinchingly."

<sup>8</sup> The word "make" is here used idiomatically for "induce." The mail system might attain the ends of compulsory voting without the compulsion. In spite of this the theory of compulsory voting is not discarded by the mailists. Because by the mail system compulsory voting could function with the least hardship and opposition, and for this reason, and to make sure of success in the point of numbers, it might be well to include it in the mail program.



mark alike if they so wished. An elector would no longer have to run the gauntlet of solicitors and ward workers to reach the ballot. Being busy would make no difference to a woman, for she would not have to dress and go out. Being sensitive would offer no obstacle, for she would not have to wait in a crowd. Being a wife and mother with a big home and babies to care for would not stand in the way of a woman's being a good citizen and a voter by the mail route. No one could possibly "forget" to vote, for the mail man would remind him by leaving the ballot. And weather would no longer decide elections!

In truth, by the easy mail system every elector would be eager to vote and would insist on voting at every election. It would summon into the political arena the vast and now silent cohorts of the "disinterested," whose uncharted potential is the romance of politics. The result would be demonstration of the "overwhelming" theory of compulsory voting, to-wit, that if every eligible could be induced to vote the great total would "overwhelm" not only evil candidates and measures, but all possible leaks and frauds. This answers the chief critics of the mail idea.

In the further work of popularizing voting, of bringing the Electorate out of its hiding place, exalting it, covering it with honors and building it up into a vast and powerful army, the mailists propose to emphasize every factor to arouse pride in being an elector; to have the Electorate, as the governing source, become a sort of American brahmanate.<sup>9</sup> Further, they hope to co-operate with existing societies for citizen building and naturalization, and propose a free

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<sup>9</sup> Hence, there might be an "Electorate Day"—a holiday like Labor Day, with parade and special political and patriotic exercises, with an electorate button and badge and possibly an electorate ensign to hang out under the Stars and Stripes. Speeches and editorials on this day would be expected to deal more with legislative measures and policies than historical patriotism.



mail course in citizenship and ballot scrutiny, as well as a government bureau to place before the elector all sides of proposed legislative measures, wherever originated.

Now for the fireworks: With a vast army of educated, trained and willing electors to vote at every election, by the responsive mail system of voting, government by the interested few would everywhere come to an end. With a firm foundation in a vast and sound Electorate the structure of American government would be bound to improve. There are no really unsolvable problems of government. Governing problems are never due to lack of intelligence but to lack of disinterested intelligence. The structure of our government is sound and adequate; it needs only a filling of sounder flesh. Under the vigilance and steady bombardment of the army of electors the fortress of political selfishness and corruption would be shaken—a little here today, a little there tomorrow—until it finally gave way and political righteousness occupied its place. Dabbling, amateurish, uncertain, mincing, argumentative, hesitating, floundering, bloc-bound methods of legislation would give place to precise, scientific, comprehensive and unwavering efficiency becoming the American age and genius.

The mail plan offers, if we want them:

1. "Wide selection and sound election."
2. An inexpensive, swift and practical modus for the popular REFERENDUM on all major measures and policies of federal and state legislation.<sup>10</sup> By this instrument our legislators could keep in close touch with the Electorate and receive its constant advice. The results in prompt and precise statutes would have a wonderfully

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<sup>10</sup> With the working out of the mail elections plan, the Initiative would be inadvisable and the Recall unnecessary.

good effect on the country's business, foreign relations and public morale.<sup>11</sup>

3. The purest form of "direct" government to discipline the wabbly representative form.

4. A responsive balloting system to revivify all other meritorious political and electoral reforms.

5. A beautiful form of direct primaries for all purposes.

6. A Presidential primary in connection with the party convention to the end of more liberal selection.

7. Elections at half the present cost, with the advantage accruing to the taxpayer.

8. A wide-awake and wide-encompassing Electorate, that of itself would prove the most unifying force in America and for Americanism, a popular fascisti, a real bulwark against dangerous radicalism.

9. WOMAN'S great political opportunity. Twenty million more disinterested women marking and mailing the ballot would mean an evening up of the political voice and that woman's would be heard as distinctly as man's in public affairs. It would mean the sweeping aside forever of the unchaste, corrupt and selfish in politics and government. It would mean that the various reforms advocated for years by women, such as maternity aid, child labor laws, better marital status for women, the abolishment of war and its wasteful preparations, cleaner cities and better living conditions throughout the land, improvement of penal institutions, asylums and almshouses—in fact all the reforms aimed at by humane womanhood—would be quickly and surely started

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<sup>11</sup> In the case of the "NRM" (National Referendum by Mail) also the Presidential election, the vastness of the expression (the proposed 50,000,000 votes), the low cost, and the almost wholly mechanical operation producing a great moral result, combined would prove an electoral classic, beautiful and thrilling and unparalleled in history.

toward realization. It would mean the placing of more women in both houses of Congress, and the possibility that some able woman might one day become President of the United States.

10. EFFECTUAL GOVERNMENT. That is, technically and ethically perfect government.

This is the presentation of a theory. Does it appeal to you?

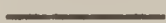
# SIDELIGHTS

## ON VOTING



### IF ONLY OTHERS TOOK IT AS SERIOUSLY.

**Mrs. — Asks to Take Ballot Home.** Society women carefully ponder list before recording choices. Mrs. —, after much meditation over the pesky ballot, asked permission from Judge Nettleton Neff to go home "and con over my list." . . . . A maid in her black uniform and cap caused diversion when, entering, she spied a group of debutantes and her mistress, a young matron. "Beg pardon," she courtesied, hastily. "I'll be back later." Speculation was rife as to whether she had skimmed on her household duties, neglected to take Fido for his morning constitutional air, or, in her efforts to be strictly "new woman," overstepped the bound of democracy.—Chicago Herald and Examiner.



**POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.**—*There should be no poverty among the industrious and deserving in this country of tremendous natural resources. That there is such poverty is due to defects in government, and defects in government are due largely to the fact that great masses of the people refuse to take politics seriously, refrain from sober political study, and in instances even refrain from voting.—William H. Stuart, in Chicago Evening American.*



### INDIAN VOTER.

A woman voted for a candidate early in the morning during the township elections at Park Ridge. Late in the afternoon she dashed back, demanding the return of her ballot, saying, "I've just heard something awful about him!" She was still arguing when the polls closed.—Chicago Herald and Examiner.



## **WAIT FOR THE MAIL MAN, NANCY.**

"It would not do any good for women to form a women's political party. We have got to go on trying to make men see that their political parties are absolutely rotten. The women must organize themselves into a powerful weapon against rotten male politics. English women know this. They are using their powers. They are more advanced than the American women.

"The most ridiculous, silly people in the world are men politicians. I do not know why it is, but when a man becomes a political official his instincts impel him to put on brass buttons and a large stomach. I have to snicker at them. Yet some of them think I am in Parliament in the capacity of a chorus girl. It is too funny."—Lady Astor, New York Journal.

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## **THE BIG BALLOT.**

The Citizens' Association points out, in a new appeal to the constitutional convention for a shorter ballot, the fact that at last month's primary the voters were called upon to select from 170 names in choosing candidates from the fifty-six offices listed on the primary ballot.

"Such a ballot," the reform body declares, "reduces the election to an absurdity, as it is manifestly impossible for any citizen, no matter how well meaning, to vote intelligently under such conditions."—Chicago Evening American.

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## **YOU MEAN EVERY INHABITANT.**

"Mr. T.: Your idea of voting by mail is O. K. if you can put it over. But you ought to add compulsory voting to it. Place a poll tax of \$10 a year on every citizen, with a credit of \$2 for each time he voted. It's an easy bet there wouldn't be a non-voter left in the country. Especially if all he had to do was to mark and mail the ballot.—Mr. and Mrs. H."

**POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.**—*It is to the interest of the INTERESTS to make politics as uninviting as possible.*—William H. Stuart, in *Chicago Evening American*.

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#### IT IS A SHAME

"Thompson & Co.: I work in a loop office where there are nearly a hundred other girls. Last Monday noon a lot of us were gathered in the women's room and talking loudly about voting. It seems two of the girls had taken time off to vote before coming to work, and were accusing the rest of us of being cowards, because we didn't. Now the boss never says anything when we take time off to vote, but we all know very well he holds it against the girls who do. You bet the argument grew warm. We all thought it a shame there wasn't a polling place in the loop where office women could be registered and run out at noon and vote. It would be so easy. Then I remembered seeing Mr. Thompson's letter in the News about voting by mail and I sprung it on them. Some of the girls thought it was too easy to be true. I don't know anything about the working of it, but I made up as I went along and gave it to them strong. Before going back to work we all agreed that mail voting would be a good thing for office women. We all love to vote. . . . C. B. M."

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"We may elect our head men by direct ballot or by vote of a senate or by heredity or by old age or by alphabetical order or by drawing straws. It does not much matter. Perhaps we should get as good results from drawing straws as we sometimes do by balloting. . . . For democracy is the coming into consciousness of the whole people; the slow shouldering of responsibility by the least citizen. Democracy is the people coming of age."—Dr. Frank Crane, in *Chicago Daily News*.

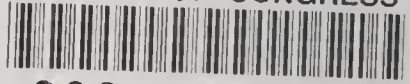
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